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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 RPO DUBAI 000549

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SUBJECT: IRAN'S ASHURA DAY VIOLENCE BRINGS REGIME TO CROSSROADS

REF: DUBAI RPO 547

CLASSIFIED BY: Alan Eyre, Director, DOS, IRPO; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

11. (C) SUMMARY: On December 27 tens of thousands of 'Green Path' oppositionists transformed the 'Ashura' religious holiday into anti-regime and anti-Khamenei demonstrations in cities throughout Iran, triggering the most violent confrontations with security forces since the June 12 presidential election (reftel). Most of the violence occurred in central Tehran's main streets and squares. Security forces composed of Law Enforcement Forces (LEF), Basij and 'plain clothes' used batons, tear gas and at least in a few instances firearms to disperse crowds of protestors ranging from a few hundred to tens of thousands. Protesters also resorted to violence, burning security officials' motorbikes and in at least several locations driving them. Iran's state media gave conflicting numbers of fatalities ranging from four to fifteen, and ascribed the disturbances to 'seditionists,' anti-revolutionists and the Monafegin' (i.e. the MEK). The most prominent death was Mir Hossein Mousavi's nephew, with some oppositionists claiming his death was intentional, to increase pressure on Mousavi. During Ashura and the following day security forces initiated a new round of arrests of prominent reformists. Although the number of 'Green Path' oppositionists willing to take to the streets has decreased from the days immediately following the June election, those remaining on the streets seem to have radicalized, and the regime now faces a choice of either seeking accommodation or increasing its suppression, with the latter more likely. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) On Ashura (Sunday, December 27) Tehran saw its most violent clashes since the start of the post-election protests. In Tehran people were out in force, mostly in central Tehran along the north-south streets on which the major universities are located. According to press, clusters of protesters ranged from several hundred to tens of thousands. During the day there were many reports of violent clashes between protesters and security forces, and one IRPO contact in touch with people in Central Tehran called today 'the most violent day' since the post-election protests began(reftel).

'EVENING OF DESOLATION'

13. (U) Traditionally in contemporary Iran the night of Ashura is 'the Evening of Desolation, ('Sham-e Qariban'), with people gathering in public areas with lighted candles. Yesterday after Tehran's bloody Ashura day clashes protestors announced that they would remain in selected public squares and parks in the evening 'to continue their struggle' (reftel). According to reformist press, as the sun set anti-riot forces and Basijis increased

deployments to most of Tehran's main squares and streets, especially in Central Tehran along Engalab Street, Vali Asr Intersection and Square, Shahid Beheshti Street, Tajrish and Mohseni Squares. There were reports of scattered clashes in Tehran and in at least one instance of gunshots being heard, although these encounters were not on the same scale as during the day. Reformist websites also report that the night-time 'Allah Akbar' shouts from Tehran rooftops were markedly more extensive than in recent memory. In Qom, plainclothes associated with 'Ansar-e Hezbollah' attacked and dispersed a gathering of reformist clerics.

OFFICIAL REACTION

¶4. (U) While no high-level government official has yet commented on the Ashura violence, law enforcement officials did, and official media have already begun to 'spin' the Ashura events. On December 28 the head of the IRGC in Qom warned Mousavi, Karrubi and Khatami that they had better 'repent and seek forgiveness from the Supreme Leader,' or else run the risk of 'facing the same fate as deposed former President Bani Sadr.' The IRGC-associated 'Fars' news-service characterized the protestors as a small group of Khatami-, Mousavi-, and Karrubi-affiliated 'seditionists' who attacked Ashura participants in the hopes of inciting a reaction from Iranian security and law-enforcement forces. Official and semi-official pro-government sources also characterized the

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protestors as a small number of 'counter-Revolutionary elements and the 'Monafeqin' (i.e. 'hypocrites-aka the MEK). Pro-government news sources quoted an 'informed Intelligence Ministry official' as saying 'at least ten' people associated with the MEK had been detained. Pro-government media characterized the protestors as engaging in wanton property destruction, assault on individuals, and even burning the Quran, and called on Mousavi, Karrubi and Khatami to denounce them.

DEATHS: 4, 5, 10, OR 15?

¶5. (U) It is still not clear how many people died as a result of Ashura day clashes, with numbers ranging from four to 15. Late afternoon December 27, Law Enforcement Forces (LEF) Deputy Commander Ahmad Reza Radan told press that during Ashura day demonstrations there had been four deaths and more than 300 people arrested. He claimed the LEF did not carry or use any firearms on rioters, and that of the four reported deaths, one had fallen from a bridge, two had been run over by cars, and the fourth was "killed suspiciously," with government experts to investigate. He also noted that Greater Tehran LEF Commander Rajabzadeh had been wounded by a thrown object.

¶6. (U) Later that night (December 27) the Greater Tehran LEF issued a statement in which it said that the LEF sought to make this year's Ashura ceremonies 'as glorious as possible,' but unfortunately a limited number of 'seditionists' 'following a pre-arranged plan influenced by foreign media' sought to disturb the public order by shouting 'deviationalist' slogans. Fortunately, by acting decisively and using crowd control equipment, but with an emphasis on not carrying or using live weapons, the LEF dispersed the crowds and neutralized the seditionists. Five people died 'in a suspicious manner,' their deaths being investigated by 'experts' (NOTE: There are Internet videos of Tehranis with gunshot wounds).

¶7. (U) A December 28 IRIB report quoted the Intelligence Ministry as saying that 15 people had died in the Ashura demonstrations, 'five killed by terrorists, and the other 10 associated with counter-revolutionaries and the MEK.' A December 28 Iran news report quoted the Iranian National Security Council as saying that eight had died: four in Tehran and four in Tabriz. One factor complicating an accurate assessment of those dead and wounded was the reluctance of protestors to yield their wounded to ambulances, for fear that they would be taken to detention centers instead of

hospitals. Indeed, there were December 28 reports of police and intelligence officials questioning and taking pictures of the wounded in hospitals.

MOUSAVI NEPHEW

18. (U) The death that drew the most media attention was that of Seyyed Ali Habibi Mousavi Khameneh, a nephew of Mir Hossein Mousavi, who died as a result of gunshot wounds (reftel). Government-associated press sought to portray his death as planned by oppositionists in order to incite anti-government sentiment. European-based oppositionist and close Mousavi friend (and former spokesman) Mohsen Makhmalbaf issued a December 28 statement saying that Ali Mousavi had been receiving death threats in the days leading up to Ashura, that he was shot in the chest at a close distance by his assailant, and that his family firmly believed that he was killed to put pressure on Mir Hossein Mousavi. Makhmalbaf also noted that Seyyed Ali Mousavi's corpse was taken by government officials, and that while the stated reason was for an official forensic examination, Makhmalbaf said the real reason was to prevent both an impartial examination of the corpse and a burial. According to oppositionist sites, Mir Hossein Mousavi said he would not issue a statement concerning his nephew's death, since 'it was no different' than the deaths of other young martyrs that day.

OTHER PROMINENT ASHURA DETAINEES

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19. (U) Many other prominent reformists/oppositionists seem to have been 'rounded up' or beaten by intelligence/security officials on Ashura and the day following, to include:

- Emadaldin Baghi: prominent Human Rights activist, former student of Grand Ayatollah Montazeri and former member of Mehdi Karrubi's campaign staff;
- Mohammad Moin, son of former reformist Presidential candidate Mostafa Moin. Mohammad was severely beaten then taken into custody;
- Mehdi Arabshahi, one of the leaders of the pro-reformist university student group 'Office for Consolidating Unity ('OCU' aka 'Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat');
- the brother of prominent reformist (and former Interior Minister) Abdollah Nuri, who was beaten badly by LEF in Esfahan on Ashura, and is reportedly in critical condition;
- Ali Reza Beheshti Shirazi, director of the 'Kalameh' website associated with Mir Hossein Mousavi;
- Mir Hossein Mousavi's senior advisor, office head, and election staff head, all three of whom were arrested;
- Morteza Haji and Hasan Rasuli, chief members of the 'Baran Foundation' affiliated with former President Khatami;
- Former Foreign Minister and current Secretary General of the (banned) Freedom Movement of Iran Ebrahim Yazdi, who was taken into custody by Intelligence officials on December 28.

OTHER CITIES

10. (U) Outside of Tehran there were reports of clashes between protestors and security/law enforcement forces in other major Iranian cities, to include Najafabad (Ayatollah Montazeri's hometown), Shiraz, Arak, Mashhad, and Ardebil. According to a reformist website, LEF in Esfahan prevented pro-opposition mourners from gathering in a mosque, and also surrounded the house of prominent dissident cleric Grand Ayatollah Taheri. One report said police announced martial law in Najafabad at 2100 hours, Dec 27,

warning people to stay in their homes. In Tabriz, oppositionist websites reported 'at least four deaths' in Ashura day clashes.

¶11. (C) COMMENT: In the immediate aftermath of the June 12 election protesters called for new elections and targeted Ahmadinejad as the problem, rather than the regime and Khamenei directly. Opposition leaders expressed their intent to work within the 'system' to resolve their issues. Since then however much of the 'Green Path' opposition movement seems to have shifted its focus to Khamenei and the regime itself, and while the numbers of 'Green Path' oppositionists who take to the streets has decreased since June, the government's jackboot tactics seems to have radicalized at least some oppositionist elements, as seen by yesterday's Ashura demonstrations. Although the 'millions in the streets' that at least one prominent opposition leader told IRPO would materialize on Ashura never did, the turnout yesterday and the concomitant violence certainly took the regime by surprise. As a prominent reformist told IRPO, 'Ashura is never a good day to be seen as an oppressor.'

¶12. (C) COMMENT: (CONT'D): The conventional wisdom is that Supreme Leader Khamenei allowed the rigged Presidential election to proceed, assuming that any popular protests could be quickly snuffed. Now nearly seven months later, it is clear that, as Rafsanjani has stated, there is still 'a fire that has not been extinguished.' After yesterday's events the regime now stands at a crossroads: it must decide whether to in some way seek compromise with at least moderate opposition elements, or to increase suppression. One IRPO contact, a US-based Iranian political analyst, expects increasing pressure on Khamenei, coming at least partially from moderate IRGC elements, to mediate a compromise. To date however, Khamenei has rejected any compromise and has repeatedly demanded that the opposition accept the election and

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cease its 'sedition.' Another IRPO contact, a prominent Iranian reformist journalist, expects the regime to use the relatively long amount of time until the next probable display of public protest on February 11 (22 Bahman, the anniversary of the Revolution's victory) to substantially increase suppression, including closing those reformist newspapers still open. Up to the present Khamenei seems to 'double down on suppression' when in doubt, and today's new round of arrests suggest such a strategy. If the regime does decide to continue on its current course, it remains to be seen whether increased suppression succeeds in neutralizing the opposition or instead further radicalizes and mobilizes it. END COMMENT.
EYRE